
Who is Missing Out? Social Media-Driven FOMO and Fashion Purchase Intentions

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the impact of social media-driven Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on fashion purchase intentions among Sri Lankan consumers, with a comparative focus on Generation Z and Generation Y. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed, with primary data collected via an online survey targeting active social media users with recent fashion purchase experience. A total of 202 valid responses were analysed using SPSS, including Pearson correlation and independent sample t-tests. The analysis reveals significant positive relationships between all three constructs: social media usage, FOMO and fashion purchase intention. FOMO emerges as an important psychological factor associated with the relationship between social media usage and fashion purchase intention. The generational comparison indicates that Generation Z reported significantly higher levels of FOMO and fashion purchase intention, though both cohorts exhibited similar social media usage intensity. Separate correlation analyses conducted for each cohort revealed two distinct behavioural pathways: Generation Z's purchasing is predominantly driven via a FOMO-influenced indirect pathway, while Generation Y demonstrates a stronger direct relationship between social media exposure and fashion purchasing. This study extends FOMO-related consumer behaviour research to the underexplored Sri Lankan digital fashion context, while offering practical implications for marketers to develop tailored, generation-specific digital strategies.

Keywords: Fashion purchase intention, FOMO, Generation Y, Generation Z, Social media usage

1. Introduction

Advancements in technology and social media have significantly influenced modern consumers' decision-making and purchasing behaviour (Saavedra & Bautista, 2020). For young individuals, social media has become a primary source of information and connection (Askari & Rashid, 2024), contributing to the rise of the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), a form of social anxiety linked to concerns about missing rewarding experiences. FOMO acts as an extrinsic, controlled motivator shaped by social pressure from online reference groups (Saavedra & Bautista, 2020). Consumers often seek gratification by purchasing fashion items that enhance their social image (Thuy, Huong, & Lan, 2023). High social media engagement exposes users to constant information on others' experiences and fashion trends, intensifying

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feelings of scarcity and desire (Askari & Rashid, 2024). The young generation of digital natives is more vulnerable to these effects (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). While both Generation Z (born 1996–2005) and Generation Y (born 1981–1995) are avid social media users, their digital formative experiences and psychological orientations differ meaningfully (Laor & Galily, 2022), making a generational comparative lens both theoretically and practically valuable.

2. Research Problem

Despite growing scholarly attention to FOMO and its behavioral consequences, research has not systematically compared generational cohorts as a moderating influence in social media-driven FOMO and its effect on fashion purchasing behavior, presenting a theoretical gap in provide in FOMO-related literature. Moreover, existing studies are concentrated in Western and East Asian contexts, with limited focus on South Asia (Askari & Rashid, 2024; Saavedra & Bautista, 2020). Sri Lanka shows high digital penetration with 8.20 million active social media users as of January 2025 representing 35.4% of the total population (DataReportal, 2025). However, little to no attention has been given to this topic in Sri Lanka, indicating a contextual gap within FOMO-fashion literature.

This study addresses these contextual and theoretical gaps by examining how social media-driven FOMO influences fashion purchase intentions among Sri Lankan young adults, with a specific focus on comparing Generation Z and Generation Y. Accordingly, the study aims to: (1) assess the relationship between social media-driven FOMO and fashion purchase intentions among Sri Lankan young adults; (2) compare social media usage, FOMO levels, and fashion purchase intention between Generation Z and Generation Y; and (3) analyse the differential impact of social media-driven FOMO on fashion purchase behaviour across both cohorts.

3. Review of the Relevant Literature

3.1. Social Media and Generational Cohorts

Social media, encompassing social networking sites and messenger applications, can be defined as web and mobile-based platforms designed to provide social interaction, information, and entertainment (Servidio, Soraci, Griffiths, Boca, & Demetrovics, 2024). GWI 2025 (GlobalWebIndex) indicates that a typical user spends an average of 18 hours and 46 minutes on social media each week, with young adults aged 18–29 reported to spend as many as 6 hours per day (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024). As the highest users of these platforms, Generation Z exhibits the consequences: information overload and anxiety more prominently, affecting both their psychological status and decision-making processes (Sharma, Kaushal, & Joshi, 2023).

The generational cohort theory proposes that shared formative experiences instill lasting similarities in values and behaviour within a cohort (Fernández-Durán, 2016). While Millennials experienced the Internet's emergence, Generation Z was born into a digital world, with social media as their focal influence (Laor & Galily, 2022). Hence, Generation Z gravitates towards visual and video-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, preferring fast, visually stimulating content and immediate gratification. On the contrary, Generation Y prefers Facebook and text-oriented platforms, engaging with more deliberate, practical and informative content and showing less urgency in comparison (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Thus, social media usage behaviours vary across generational cohorts, and exploring these differences helps comprehend the resultant varied engagement and behaviour.

3.2. Fashion Retail in the Age of Social Media

Young adults are the key target group of fast fashion, characterized by high clothing overconsumption influenced by social media advertisements and trends (De Koning, Lavanga,

& Spekkink, 2024). Social media constructs such as interaction, customisation, hedonic motivation, product discovery, and trendiness have been shown to enhance purchase intent (Habib & Almamy, 2025), with platforms like Facebook and Instagram serving as major sources of fashion inspiration; 68% of participants in a 2018 Indian study cited them as such (Muturi, 2024). These platforms have also transformed trend adoption itself, enabling rapid virality through direct consumer interaction, while integrated shopping features enable immediate conversion from inspiration to purchase; making the social media environment inherently engineered to foster engagement and purchasing in fashion retail.

Valuable insights are revealed when fashion consumption behaviour is examined across the two generations, highlighting how social media engagement differentially shapes their behavioural patterns. Generation Z accounts for 41% of impulse buyers, the highest of all cohorts, is highly trend-driven, influenced by peers, and uses fashion for self-expression and social signaling (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Generation Y, while also trend-influenced, demonstrates higher brand loyalty, more deliberate purchasing, and a greater tendency towards status consumption (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017).

3.3. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Fashion Purchasing

FOMO is defined as a subjective perception or worry of missing out on interesting or exciting events happening elsewhere that others are a part of (Saavedra & Bautista, 2020). According to Przybylski et al. (2013), FOMO arises from deficits in three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Those with unmet needs may perceive social media as a tool for social competence, with FOMO serving as an intermediary, linking psychological deficits to social media engagement.

FOMO is driven by uncertainty about social belonging, compelling individuals towards social comparison, conformity and mainstream adherence (Servidio et al., 2024). The objective of FOMO-driven conduct is to pursue external rewards (Askari & Rashid, 2024). FOMO operates as an extrinsic, controlled motivational force, arising from social pressures imposed by online reference groups (Saavedra & Bautista, 2020). It obstructs rational decision-making and is persuasive in driving action, closely aligned with regret avoidance (Habib & Almamy, 2025); a dynamic directly relevant to fashion consumption's inherent social and psychological stakes.

People often address their need for self-esteem by purchasing products that allow them to present themselves as part of, or superior within their communities, motivated by the desire to demonstrate financial and social strength (Askari & Rashid, 2024); particularly in fashion, where high-end products symbolize status. Immediate gratification from acquiring new fashion items can temporarily relieve anxiety and fulfil the desire to belong (Thuy et al., 2023). Persistent use of social media regularly exposes consumers to a nonstop flow of fashion trends, and information on others' experiences, generating feelings of scarcity and urgency to buy first or buy the most (Askari & Rashid, 2024). This often drives consumers to spend excessively to showcase a higher lifestyle online, overlooking quality or affordability in the process (Askari & Rashid, 2024). Hence, FOMO can be identified as a significant mediating factor between social media interaction and purchase intention in trend-driven lifestyle products (Habib & Almamy, 2025). While prior literature shows both generational cohorts display clear FOMO-driven behavioural tendencies, the effect of FOMO likely varies across them; operating through different pathways and intensities. In that regard, the study aims to identify the distinct patterns, degrees of FOMO and the behaviours it induces across the two cohorts.

3.4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs. Building on SDT, Przybylski et al. (2013) proposed that deficiencies in relatedness and social competence contribute to the emergence of FOMO, which then drives social media engagement as a compensatory mechanism. Thereby, FOMO is viewed as an extrinsic, controlled motivator, driving action not by genuine desire, but by the anxiety of social exclusion and regret aversion. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) further explains how exposure to peers' fashion content on social media triggers upward social comparison, generating the urgency and anxiety that characterize FOMO. SCT therefore explains that it is not mere exposure, but the comparison process itself that creates the psychological gap triggering FOMO. Integrating these perspectives, this study proposes that social media usage activates social comparison processes, which generate FOMO through unmet needs for relatedness, ultimately driving fashion purchase intentions as a restorative behavioural response.

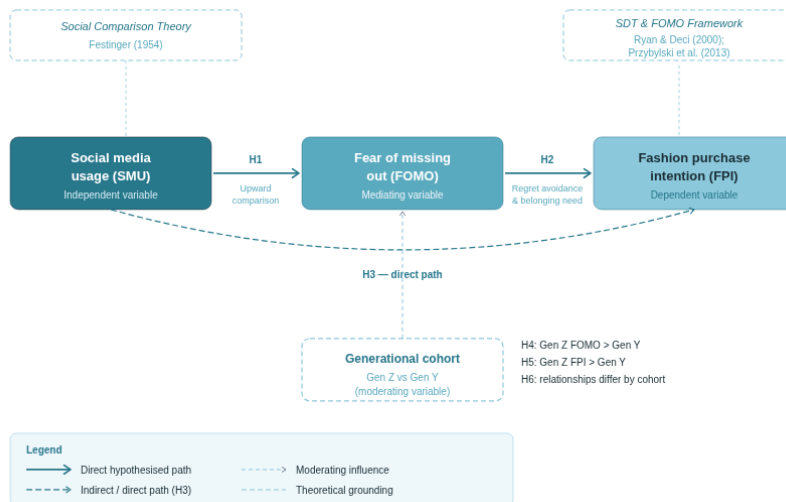


Figure 1: Conceptual Path Diagram - SMU, FOMO and FPI (no covariates controlled)

Given the documented generational differences in social media engagement and fashion consumption, the study also examines whether this framework operates differently across Generation Z and Generation Y.

The following hypotheses guide the empirical investigation:

- *H1*: Social media usage is positively associated with FOMO among Sri Lankan young adults
- *H2*: FOMO is positively associated with fashion purchase intention among Sri Lankan young adults
- *H3*: Social media usage is positively associated with fashion purchase intention among Sri Lankan young adults
- *H4*: There is a significant difference between Generation Z and Generation Y in FOMO
- *H5*: There is a significant difference between Generation Z and Generation Y in fashion purchase intention

- *H6*: The relationships among social media usage, FOMO, and fashion purchase intention differ between Generation Z and Generation Y

4. Methods

The research process followed four stages: establishing the research design and variables based on the study objectives; defining the target population and sampling approach, followed by primary data collection and screening against predefined eligibility criteria; measuring constructs using adapted established scales; and analyzing the data through descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, independent-samples t-tests, and cohort-specific correlation analyses.

4.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design. FOMO was positioned as the primary psychological mechanism linking social media engagement to fashion consumption, while a comparative analysis between Generation Z and Generation Y examined differential effects between variables and their interrelationships across cohorts. Based on this research design, the target population, eligibility criteria, and sampling approach were established to obtain data relevant to the study objectives.

4.2. Sample and Data Collection

The target population comprised active social media users in Sri Lanka belonging to Generation Z (1996–2005) and Generation Y (1981–1995) (Laor & Galily, 2022). Eligibility criteria for the study required a minimum of 20 minutes of daily social media usage, following at least one fashion brand on social media, and having made a fashion-related purchase within the prior six months.

Primary data were collected via a self-administered, structured online questionnaire distributed through WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. A non-probability convenience sampling method, paired with a quota strategy, was utilised to ensure a balanced generational representation. Of 233 responses received, 31 (13.3%) were excluded for non-adherence to screening criteria, yielding a final usable sample of 202 respondents: 104 from Generation Z (51.5%) and 98 from Generation Y (48.5%). Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, including voluntary participation, informed consent and the assurance of respondent anonymity.

4.3. Measurement Instruments

The survey instrument employed a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Measurement items were adapted from previously validated scales and modified to the context of the current study to ensure reliability.

Reliability analysis yielded Cronbach's alpha values above the 0.7 threshold (Nunnally, 1978) for all constructs (SMU: $\alpha = 0.880$; FOMO: $\alpha = 0.916$; FPI: $\alpha = 0.903$), confirming high internal consistency. Construct validity was assessed via exploratory factor analysis (see Table 2), with sampling adequacy confirmed for all constructs (KMO = 0.854 - 0.888, $p < .001$). Discriminant validity is further supported by inter-construct correlations ($r = 0.461 - 0.676$), all below the 0.85 threshold for construct distinctiveness (Kline, 2011).

The resulting constructs were then subjected to the statistical analyses described below to examine the relationships among the variables and differences between the two generational cohorts.

Table 1: Operationalization of Variables

Construct/ Variable	Source	No. of Items	Dimensions
Social Media Usage (SMU) (Independent Variable)	Adapted from Habib & Almamy (2025).	9 items	Interaction with fashion brands, perceived trendiness, urgency/scarcity perception, and engagement behaviours
Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)	Adapted from Przybylski et al. (2013).	7 items	Social connectedness needs, regret avoidance, and exclusion anxiety
Fashion Purchase Intention (FPI) (Dependent Variable)	Adapted from Amarullah et al. (2025)	5 items	Likelihood to purchase, intention to buy, and willingness to consider fashion products influenced by social media

Table 2: Construct Validity Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

Construct	KMO	Bartlett's (Sig.)	Test	Variance Explained	Factor Loading Range
SMU	0.878	< 0.001		74.1%	0.51 - 0.86
FOMO	0.888	< 0.001		68.1%	0.40 - 0.92
FPI	0.854	< 0.001		72.2%	0.79 - 0.88

4.4. Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), reliability, and validity were calculated for the full sample. Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationships between SMU, FOMO, and FPI. Independent samples t-tests compared the mean differences of SMU, FOMO, and FPI across generational cohorts. Separate Pearson correlation analyses were conducted for each cohort to examine the differential strength of inter-variable relationships.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

The full usable sample ($N = 202$) recorded moderate mean scores across all three constructs. SMU had a mean of 27.59 ($SD = 7.881$) on a 45-point scale, FOMO a mean of 16.47 ($SD = 7.080$) on a 35-point scale, and FPI a mean of 15.26 ($SD = 4.842$) on a 25-point scale.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Total Sample ($N = 202$)

Variable	Maximum Score	Mean	Standard Deviation
SMU	45	27.59	7.881
FOMO	35	16.47	7.080
FPI	25	15.26	4.842

5.2. Relationships among Variables

To examine the relationships among social media usage, FOMO, and fashion purchase intention, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted for the full sample. Statistically significant positive relationships were observed between all three constructs ($p < 0.01$). The relationship between SMU and FPI was the strongest ($r = 0.676$), followed by FOMO and FPI, and SMU and FOMO.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Values for the Total Sample ($p < 0.01$)

Relationship	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value
SMU → FOMO	0.461	< 0.01
FOMO → FPI	0.505	< 0.01
SMU → FPI	0.676	< 0.01

These findings support H1, H2, and H3 and propose that increased SMU is associated with higher levels of FOMO, with both factors positively associated with fashion purchase intention. The pattern of correlations suggests that FOMO may function as a partial mediator, although formal mediation testing was not conducted in this study.

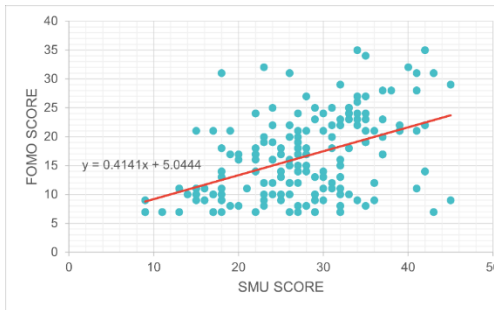


Figure 2: Scatter Plot of FPI by

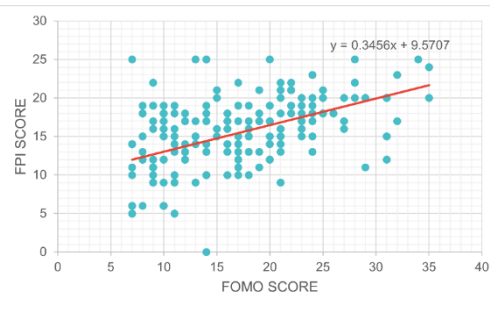


Figure 3: Scatter Plot of FPI by FOMO

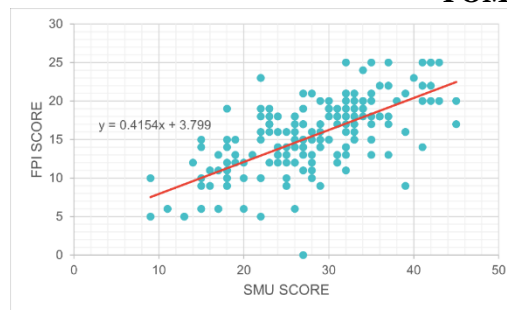


Figure 4: Scatter Plot of FPI by SMU

5.3. Generational Comparison

Independent samples t-tests examined whether cohort-specific differences exist in SMU, FOMO and FPI (Table 4). Generation Z recorded higher mean scores across all three constructs, with statistically significant differences for FOMO ($p < 0.001$) and FPI ($p = 0.019$), supporting H4 and H5. The difference in SMU was marginal and non-significant ($p = 0.051$), suggesting both cohorts use social media at similar intensities, while their psychological and behavioural responses differ.

Table 5: Generational Comparison - Mean Values and Significance

Variable	Gen Z Mean	Gen Y Mean	p-value
SMU	28.64	26.48	0.051
FOMO	18.09	14.76	<.001
FPI	16.04	14.44	0.019

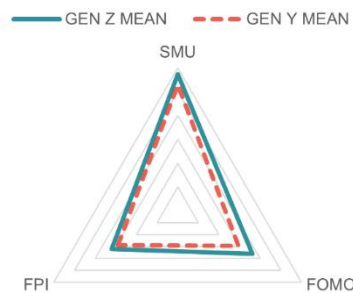


Figure 5: Generational Profile Comparison - Mean Scores across SMU, FOMO and FPI

Comparative Pearson correlation analyses conducted separately for each cohort (Table 5) revealed distinct inter-variable relationship patterns, providing support for H6.

Table 6: Comparative Correlation Analysis by Generation ($p < 0.01$)

Relationship	Gen Z (r)	Gen Y (r)
SMU → FOMO	0.567	0.306
FOMO → FPI	0.618	0.344
SMU → FPI	0.631	0.708

For Generation Z, the SMU-FOMO ($r = 0.567$) and FOMO-FPI ($r = 0.618$) correlations were substantially higher than for Generation Y ($r = 0.306$ and $r = 0.344$, respectively), indicating that FOMO may play a more distinct role in Generation Z's purchasing pathway. Conversely, Generation Y exhibited a stronger direct SMU-FPI correlation ($r = 0.708$) compared to Generation Z ($r = 0.631$), suggesting that social media directly drives their purchase intentions, with FOMO playing a lesser role.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between social media-driven FOMO and fashion purchase intentions among Sri Lankan young adults, with a comparative analysis on Generations Z and Y. The findings support the integrated theoretical framework proposed, confirming significant positive relationships between all three constructs. The moderate SMU-FOMO correlation supports H1 and reinforces the proposition of Przybylski et al. (2013) that FOMO arises from deficits in social competence and relatedness, amplified through social media exposure. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) further explains this mechanism in which upward social comparison triggered by peers' fashion content generates the urgency and anxiety associated with FOMO.

The significant FOMO-FPI relationship supports H2, characterizing FOMO as an extrinsic behavioural motivator that drives purchasing as a restorative response to perceived social exclusion. This aligns with Habib and Almamy (2025), who position FOMO as a central mediating force between social media interaction and purchase intention in trend-driven categories; in the fashion context, manifesting as purchasing aimed at closing the psychological gap between oneself and others. Thuy et al. (2023) similarly found this purchasing behaviour driven by immediate gratification and desire to belong is particularly noticeable in fashion, where high-end products are perceived as symbols of status and social identity. The strongest correlation, between SMU and FPI corroborates H3 and upholds the findings of Askari and Rashid (2024) finding that persistent social media use compels consumers to spend excessively to showcase a higher lifestyle online, driven by constructs that promote purchase intent such as interaction, peer validation, hedonic motivation and trendiness (Habib & Almamy, 2025). This suggests social media, in its own right, functions as a powerful channel, capable of converting engagement into purchase intentions.

The generational comparison revealed theoretically significant disparities in psychological and behavioural patterns. Despite both cohorts using social media at comparable intensities, Generation Z reported significantly higher FOMO and purchase intention, supporting the findings of Fernandes and Oliveira (2024) that the digital-native Generation Z is more susceptible to the psychological impacts of social media. This suggests that generational differences are more evident in the psychological and behavioral responses to social media than in the usage intensity itself; comparable engagement does not necessarily translate into identical consumer responses across generations.

The comparative correlation analysis further uncovered two distinct behavioural pathways to fashion purchase decisions, reinforcing H6. Generation Z's purchasing is predominantly channeled through a FOMO-influenced indirect pathway (SMU → FOMO → FPI), consistent with their preference for visual, comparison-prone platforms like Instagram and TikTok and their highly trend-driven, impulsive behaviour (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Generation Y, by contrast, exhibits a stronger direct SMU-FPI relationship, less dependent on FOMO, consistent with their more instrumental, practical usage of social media, as a source of information and lifestyle validation rather than self-evaluation (Valaei & Nikhashemi, 2017).

6.2. Implications of the Study

Theoretically, the study extends FOMO-driven consumer behavior literature to the underexplored Sri Lankan digital fashion context, and also adds a generational comparative lens, advancing beyond descriptive differences to identify distinct structural pathways through which SMU, FOMO, and FPI interact across cohorts, offering a more nuanced psychological

interpretation of generationally driven consumption. Further, for policymakers and consumer-protection bodies, the findings speak to the psychological drivers behind fashion overconsumption among young adults, a concern connected to wider sustainability and responsible-consumption debates.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all digital marketing strategy is likely suboptimal. For Generation Z, campaigns leveraging psychological urgency such as scarcity messaging, limited-edition drops, and influencer-driven exclusivity are likely most effective, given their FOMO-driven purchasing pathway. For Generation Y, strategies should prioritize content quality, credibility, value-based messaging, and community engagement, given their stronger direct relationship between social media exposure and purchase intention. This enables fashion brands and digital marketers to design more precisely targeted campaigns rather than generic strategies.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. Non-probability convenience sampling, recruited via the researchers' own social media networks, may limit the generalisability to the broader Sri Lankan young adult population. Self-reported Likert-scale measures are susceptible to over- or understatement, affecting data accuracy. The cross-sectional design restricts temporal validity, and since the study measures purchase intention rather than actual behaviour, findings cannot guarantee real-world outcomes. The study is also geographically confined to Sri Lanka, limiting its universality, and formal mediation testing was not conducted, precluding confirmation of FOMO's mediating role.

Future research could address these limitations. Structural equation modelling would allow formal confirmation of FOMO's mediating role. Replication across diverse cultural contexts would also advance the generalisability of these findings. Furthermore, qualitative methods could provide deeper psychological insight into the quantitative findings of this study.

6.4. Conclusion

The rapidly evolving digital landscape has significantly influenced the social, psychological and behavioural patterns of Sri Lankan young adults. This study demonstrates significant relationships among social media usage, FOMO, and fashion purchase intention, while also identifying meaningful generational differences between Generation Z and Generation Y. Although the two cohorts did not differ significantly in social media usage, Generation Z reported higher levels of FOMO and fashion purchase intention, with the relationships among study variables also differing across cohorts; suggesting these differences lie not in the extent of social media usage, but in its diverging psychological and behavioural influence. Practically, these insights provide a foundation for more targeted, psychologically informed, cohort-specific digital marketing strategies in Sri Lanka's rapidly evolving fashion retail landscape. Furthermore, the study contributes to the existing literature by extending research on social-media-driven FOMO and fashion purchase intention to the Sri Lankan context and by providing a comparison between Generation Z and Generation Y. Overall, the study provides a foundation for future research into the psychological and behavioral mechanisms underlying social-media-driven fashion consumption across different cultural and generational contexts.

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